

Screen dreams in John Wayne country

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Utah has provided the backdrop for films from 'Stagecoach' to 'Thelma & Louise'. It's a great place for an adventure, writes GENEVIEVE CARBERY

TUMBLEWEED ROLLS across the empty road. Nothing else stirs in the canyon or on the prairie around it. At any moment I expect to hear the whinny of a wild horse or the whistle of a lonesome cowboy, for Utah surely defines the Much of Utah sits atop the Colorado Plateau, and its sandstone formations bear the imprint of millions of years of erosion in dramatic, colourful beauty. These arches and canyons form the backdrop for an endless variety of walks, horse trails in one of the state's five national parks. When added to Native American culture and dinosaur fossils, this sparse state offers visitors many chances for adventure – you get all of the drama of the Grand Canyon without expense and the well-worn tourist paths.

This vast state just begs to be explored on a great American road trip. Scenic Byway 12, part of a circuit of 29 stretching from Las Vegas to Albuquerque and Salt Lake City, connects Canyonlands National Park with the equally dry Zion parks, winding 200km along stepped cliffs.

Canyonlands, which is the biggest of the state's parks, features hundreds of rock formations known as islands in the sky. Although most are hard to get close to without an arduous trek, it is just a short hike up to the hanging Mesa / spine-linging views, especially at sunrise.

To the northeast is Arches National Park, home to Utah's state icon, the Delicate Arch. Once known as the Chops, for its resemblance to a pair of cowboys' legs, it stands at the edge of a bowl of red rock that looks slippery but gives you the feel like Spider-Man.

If you look through the arch you get a taste of the variety of Utah's landscape, from across the Colorado River canyon (popular for white-water rafting) to snow-topped mountain peaks (Utah claims to have the best snow on earth).

To relive, up to a point, that Thelma & Louise moment, with the wind in your hair and nowhere to go but down, head for nearby Dead Horse Point State Park, where the 1991 film was made. The park towers above the Colorado river empty canyons.

For more film sets – this time from westerns, and on a grand scale – Monument Valley is worth a stop, to see if you recognise backdrops from Legend of the Lone Ranger or even Mission Impossible III. You can explore the Navajo–Native American guides, when private, quiet locals will explain the ancient (Tso' Bi' Ndzisgani) and not-so-ancient (via Alfred Hitchcock) names they give to the area and its odd-shaped mounds.

One of the only places to stay in the valley is Goulding's Lodge, which is integral to the area's big-screen history. Staff proudly tell the fascinating tale of how Harry and Leone Goulding – or Mike, as her husband called her, unable name – set off for Hollywood from their small trading post in the middle of this isolated and unknown valley.

When they arrived at the office of the director John Ford, they were told it would be days before he could see them. So Harry went back to his truck, got his blankets and explained that he didn't mind waiting. When a location manager photographs of Monument Valley that Harry had spread on the waiting-room floor, he finally got a meeting. Ten days later the cast and crew arrived to make the valley's first film, Stagecoach, starring John Wayne.

Bryce Canyon and Zion national parks are the gems of the state. Hundreds of eerie hoodoos, or pillars of weathered rock, at Bryce Canyon look like ancient totem poles. As its name suggests, Zion is a lush green park alive with pine. On top of that, its ever-changing red cliffs are full of geological drama. The death-defying trek to Angel's Landing is thrilling, tough and unforgettable. The hike climbs three kilometres along switchback bonds that lead to a narrow 1,800m high. Firmly fastened metal ropes are the only way to pull yourself up over the rocks. And don't look down: a sheer drop awaits below, and there have been a number of fatal falls on this trail. Stunning views down the green v. biting climb.

The dinosaurs that roamed across the state are well preserved as fossils. Bones are excavated daily, and more than a dozen museums of prehistory offer a chance to meet with and watch palaeontologists preparing dinosaur specimens. Exhibits come from nearby digs, but some are bought at annual dinosaur- and fossil-trading shows. One local palaeontologist explained that dinosaur trading is big business, especially on eBay, where he has seen a full mammoth for tens of thousands of dollars.

YOU SHOULD GET a warm welcome from Utah's mainly Mormon population (60 per cent are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints). Despite their strict religious restrictions on alcohol and tobacco, locals are the habits of visitors – although even outsiders have to comply with the state's legal restrictions on alcohol, which have led to private clubs rather than pubs and require bartenders to mix drinks behind a barrier. According to another finish one beer before starting another – which means knocking them back when the waiter comes to your table. You shouldn't get any disapproving looks when you order a drink, but somehow, when everyone else is extremely so, feel a little guilty.

Mormons are quick to dispel the notion that they are polygamous – the practice has been illegal here since the 19th century and is continued only among fundamentalist sects.

Their attachment to family is nowhere better seen than at the Family History Library, which the Mormons run. Located in Salt Lake City, it contains the world's largest collection of genealogical records, gathered from 110 countries. Visitors can spend hours among dusty files, looking through microfiche and on computers for family secrets.

For a little Bohemianism in the midst of Utah's Mormon stoicism, stop off in Boulder. This quirky town claims to be the last community to receive its post by mule train. It is also home to the site of a 1,000-year-old Pueblo village. We revolted against the colonising Spanish, in 1680, the organisers sent a knotted cord to each tribe. They would untie one knot each day, when they untied the last one they knew it was time to rebel. The Pueblos forced the Spanish then off for 70 years.

Utah is a jewel that doesn't tend to feature on glossy travel brochures, but its empty canyons, wind-whipped arches and endless prairies make the state's imposing landscape an invitation to get lost in an adventure.

* Genevieve Carbery was a guest of Utah Office of Tourism (www.utahtravel.com) and Aer Lingus.

Where to stay, eat and go in Utah

Where to stay

Zion Mountain Ranch. East Highway 9, Zion National Park, 00-1-866-6482555, www.zionmountainresort.com. To unwind and experience the quiet cowboy life for a few days, this unique ranch has all-American wood cabins, horse herds of buffalo. Cabins from €90.

Goulding's Lodge. Monument Valley, 00-1-435-7273231, www.gouldings.com. This lodge is a piece of Utah's Hollywood history. Book in advance for plain rooms with stunning desert sunrise views. Double rooms from €160.